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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 THE HAGUE 000123

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [NL](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [TU](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/SYRIA: DUTCH FM PUSHES SYRIA TO
SUPPORT PEACE PROCESS

Classified By: DCM Michael F. Gallagher for reasons 1.5(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On February 8, 2008, poloff discussed Dutch FM Verhagen's January 23-24 trip to Syria with Gert Kampman, MFA Deputy Director for the Middle East. Kampman, who accompanied Verhagen during the trip, said that the FM reviewed the Middle East peace process, Lebanon, Iran, and human rights during his meetings with FM Mouallem and President Asad. Verhagen received assurances that both Syria and Israel support Turkey's mediation efforts. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Kampman said Verhagen made a "plea" for support regarding the Middle East peace process. Verhagen indicated that "Syria needs to make a choice" about whether to support peace or violence. Asked about the pro-Hamas conference taking place that day in Damascus, FM Mouallem insisted that the Syrians were not hosting the conference. He noted that as a matter of free speech, the Syrians could also not cancel the conference. However, the conference was originally planned to take place in Tehran. The GOS played a moderating influence by keeping the conference out of Tehran and keeping it from taking place at the same time as the Annapolis conference. Mouallem also argued that Hamas and Fatah needed to be united for President Abbas to sell a peace agreement to the Palestinian people. For that reason, Abbas was invited to the conference, although he refused to attend. NOTE: A few days before in Ramallah, Verhagen raised the idea of Syrian mediation with Palestinian President Abbas. Abbas said clearly he was not interested in mediation but rather in Hamas renouncing its authority.

¶3. (C) On Lebanon, Kampman said Verhagen urged the Syrians to support consensus on the president, the government and an election law. The Syrians said they were doing their best, and had previously agreed to work with France to push both sides toward compromise. However, the French did not do what they promised. The Syrians believe the United States pressured the French to dissuade them from pressuring anti-Syrian forces in Lebanon. Kampman noted that Asad and Mouallem were very negative about French FM Kouchner -- he's no longer welcome as an intermediary, and UN Under Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations Guehenno is the preferred contact. Syria supports the Arab League effort, which follows the France-Syria model of pushing both sides toward compromise. However, Mouallem was not optimistic about the chances of success, as the Arab League SYG is too bogged down in the math of Lebanese parliament representation.

¶4. (C) On cross-border arms smuggling in Lebanon, Kampman said the Syrians denied any major smuggling -- especially not rockets. According to the Syrians, smuggling is a general problem, and small arms may get through. Any large arms to Lebanon would be coming through the Mediterranean. Verhagen responded that there are credible reports of arms smuggling

across the Lebanon-Syria border, and that Syria should assist partners in the region to support stability. The EU was willing to assist in monitoring the border. The Syrians rejected any EU monitors, saying they were unacceptable for a sovereign state. Contributions of equipment and training, however, would be welcome.

15. (C) On Iran, Verhagen noted that time was running out for Iran to comply with UN resolutions, and that the Dutch support additional sanctions. The Syrians urged the Dutch to give Iran and the IAEA more time to resolve the matter. According to the Syrians, the Iranians are stubborn and proud, so additional time is needed. The Syrians said they also wanted an Iran without nuclear weapons.

16. (C) On human rights, Kampman said Verhagen made "strong points" about the universality of human rights and urged the Syrians to release the arrested human rights activists. Asad acknowledged the need to improve. He indicated that he plans changes in the political and economic spheres to expand rights. However, he needs to move gradually due to the bureaucracy, culture, and religion in Syria. Asad said he couldn't implement radical changes because "the people would oppose" them. Kampman commented that it was "interesting" for a dictator to discuss the will of the people. He noted that Asad also spoke of "the people" as supporting efforts to unify Hamas and Fatah.

17. (C) On mediations by Turkey between Syria and Israel, Kampman said the Syrians confirmed the effort. The Syrians set two conditions: accepting the 1967 border and U.S. involvement. Progress on Israel-Palestine negotiations was not a pre-condition for Syria. In a sidebar meeting to the Herzliya conference on January 21, Kampman said Israeli

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Defense Minister Barak also confirmed Turkish mediation and told Verhagen to tell the Syrians "we are serious and we will try to convince the Israeli cabinet and the USG." Kampman also noted that the Israelis had nothing negative to say about the Dutch visit to Syria.

18. (C) COMMENT: Asked whether he thought the trip was worthwhile in retrospect, Kampman said the Dutch continue to support engagement rather than isolation for their Syria policy. Although FM Verhagen does not have plans for another visit, he believes in continued engagement, a "critical dialogue." Kampman thought that Asad and Mouallem seemed genuinely interested in dialogue. Asked about the arrest of Syrian activist Riad Seif shortly after FM's Verhagen's visit, Kampman said that it undermines Asad's credibility. He added that Verhagen sees the pros and cons of dialogue. Kampman hadn't spoken with Verhagen since the conclusion of the trip, but he suspected the arrests would "increase doubts" about the engagement policy -- the "Syrians need to prove they're sincere." At the same time, the FM believes the policy of dialogue should be an EU effort, and that the EU needs a common approach. END COMMENT.
Arnall